Whose Medium? Whose Message?:

A Critical Media Literacy Approach to "Information Has Value"

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ACRL Information Literacy Frame: Information Has Value
Discipline: Arts & Humanities
Subjects: Journalism; Communication; Media Studies
Learning Theory: Critical Media Literacy
Special Populations: Undergraduate Students; Professional Students

ACRL Information Literacy Frame: Information Has Value

Like many librarians, I look for methods for teaching information evaluation that move beyond dichotomies (scholarly versus non-scholarly, good versus bad, etc.) and prompt students to take a more nuanced approach. One of the ways I do this is by encouraging students to consider economic, social, and cultural factors that shape the way sources are both produced and evaluated. Two things happened recently that inspired me to create a lesson plan that pairs evaluation of a source's content with an exploration of the economic and social contexts underlying its production. First, the ACRL *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education* was pub-

lished. Out of the six core concepts or "frames" presented in the framework, the third, Information Has Value, resonated with me in particular. It states, "Information possesses several dimensions of value, including as a commodity, as a means of education, as a means to influence, and as a means of negotiating and understanding the world. Legal and socioeconomic interests influence information production and dissemination."[1] Part of becoming information literate includes understanding "how and why some individuals or groups of individuals may be underrepresented or systematically marginalized within the systems that produce and disseminate information."[2] Here was an invitation to explore the socioeconomic systems underlying an information source's production, and how and why they might privilege some groups and marginalize others, within the context of an information literacy instruction.

Also around this time, I began working with more classes where students were engaging with news media and other journalistic sources in the context of discussing current political and socio-cultural events, including the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Black Lives Matter and protests against police brutality, and the Syrian refugee crisis. These classes were opportunities to explore the Information Has Value frame. To understand issues relating to media bias means asking why certain issues get covered in media while others are marginalized or not reported on at all, and why certain groups of people are marginalized or underrepresented within systems of media production. Answering these questions, in turn, involves exploring the socioeconomic interests underlying how information is produced and disseminated. These questions can be understood as taking a critical media literacy approach to the Information Has Value frame.

Learning Theory: Critical Media Literacy

Originating in cultural studies and critical pedagogy, critical media literacy is an educational theory that posits that media sources reflect and perpetuate ideologies and power imbalances of the society in which they are produced with regard to gender, race, sexuality, ability, and socioeconomic status.[3] Teaching critical media literacy involves encouraging students to explore how power and information are linked by analyzing media representations they encounter and by examining "the production and institutions that motivate and structure the media industries as corporate profit seeking businesses."[4]

Critical media literacy is a powerful lens through which to help students learn about the Information Has Value frame. This frame posits that legal and socioeconomic interests shape information production and dissemination, and that it is important to understand how information production and dissemination systematically marginalizes or underrepresents certain groups of individuals and over-represents or normalizes others. Similarly, as critical media literacy theorists Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share write, media representations "benefit dominant and positively represented groups and disadvantage marginalized and subordinate ones." These biases "become especially pernicious when two factors exist: (1) limited and dominant groups do the majority of the representing, as in the case of the multinational corporate mass media; (2) messages are naturalized, such that people seldom question the transparent social construction of the representations."[5] Thus, taking a critical media literacy approach to exploring the Information Has Value frame would involve (1) helping students learn about the groups who "do the majority of the representing," and (2) encouraging students to do close readings of media texts in order to critically analyze or "de-naturalize" their messages, with a view to perceiving how certain groups are portrayed positively and others negatively.

The lesson in this chapter applies critical media literacy to news media specifically. Seth Ashley, Adam Maksl, and Stephanie Craft note, "Audiences can be better equipped to access, evaluate, analyze, and create news media products if they have a more complete understanding of the conditions in which news is produced."[6] As ownership of mass media becomes ever more consolidated in the hands of a few multinational corporations, "knowing what sort of corporation produces a media artifact …will help to critically interpret biases and distortions in media texts."[7] It is important to encourage students "to consider the question of why the message was sent and where it came from."[8] While the first part of this lesson involves having students critically analyze media representations through a close reading and discussion of specific news sources, the second part involves going beyond the text by having them find information about media companies (ownership, readership, etc.) that produce the news sources they have analyzed. The goal in equipping students to move beyond the text by researching media companies is not only to help them learn about the conditions through which news is produced and disseminated but to be able to synthesize this information with insights derived from close textual

analysis. In other words, students make connections between the socioeconomic conditions of news media's production and the normalization or marginalization of different groups and interests within news media.

Best- and Worst-Case Teaching Scenarios

Ideally, this lesson would be taught over two class sessions. Students would be primed for the lesson by receiving pre-instruction (either from their course instructor or through readings) on the concepts of journalistic objectivity, bias, and ideology. Another element in a best-case teaching scenario for this lesson is pairing it with a project where students are creating their own media. Responding to concerns that critical media literacy may cause "cynicism, alienation, and disengagement" from media and politics, Hobbs et al. find that "media-literate students have more positive but nuanced perspectives on the role of journalism and society."[9] Further, giving students the opportunity to create multimedia empowers them "to become active participants in the process of democracy."[10] Thus, in an ideal teaching scenario, students would learn to critique media representations and understand the socioeconomic conditions of production while at the same time producing alternatives to mainstream media representations through the creation of their own media.

A worst-case teaching scenario, on the other hand, would be a one-shot with no pre-instruction or where there were no previous class discussions about issues relating to journalistic objectivity, bias, or ideology. Although this lesson can be taught in a one-shot session, it works better if students have been prompted to think critically about media bias and objectivity, and about how ideology operates in society, including in the press.

Lesson Plan

Learner Analysis

- Typical student: A college student who consumes media sources on a regular basis.
- Special populations: Undergraduate students majoring in mass communication, media studies, or a similar field, and professional students in journalism. Undergraduate students in mass communication or media studies should learn to think critically about

how ideology and commercial bias influence the way that news is produced.[11] Similarly, professional students preparing for a career in journalism should be given the opportunity to think through how the socioeconomic conditions of the organizations they work for may influence the content they create.

- Limitations in regard to the typical student: This lesson employs participatory pedagogy. In other words, the lesson does not take a primarily lecture-based approach, with the expectation that students will be evaluated on their ability to answer questions correctly. Instead, students are challenged to be active participants in the discussion, to think critically, and to share their insights with their classmates. This may be challenging for many students who have come up in an educational system in which lecture/PowerPoint is the dominant instructional method. It is important that the course instructor and librarian work together to create a classroom where students feel safe to express their thoughts, without fear of being told they are wrong, while at the same time maintaining an environment of mutual respect and safety. One way the librarian can approach this is by having a conversation with the course instructor ahead of time to learn about specific classroom dynamics (Is the class talkative or reserved? Do certain individuals dominate?). The librarian and course instructor should present some ground rules at the beginning of the class to ensure a respectful environment. These could include things like letting students know the classroom is space where you might hear different opinions or views but where everyone is to listen and show respect for each other, and encouraging students to use "I" statements when possible. Content warnings could be provided ahead of time for articles used in Activity 1.
- Opportunities in regard to the typical student: Although college students consume many forms of media on a daily basis, they may not apply a critical lens to it, especially when it comes to evaluating biases stemming from commercial interests. At the other extreme, some may have a general sense that "The Media" is biased, as if it were a monolithic entity. One opportunity this lesson presents with regard to the typical student is to build on their existing interest in engaging in media sources by giving them the tools to do a more nuanced critique.

Orienting Context and Prerequisites

- No pre-instruction learner tasks are required.
- Optional pre-instruction task: Students view a tutorial on using databases (see point 3 under "Pre-Instruction Work" below).
- Students must have basic library skills (i.e., familiarity with searching library databases and an understanding of the differences among types of information sources).

Instructional Context

Optimal physical teaching environment

- Instructor computer station with projector
- Students sit in small groups. Each student has a physical surface, a computer or tablet, and the ability to share their screen on a large screen that the entire class can view (using collaborative technology such as media:scape, Crestron, or similar).

Optimal online teaching environment

- A web conferencing platform that allows for synchronous instruction and interactivity via video, audio, and chat, screen sharing by both those in the "host" (librarian) and "participant" (student) roles, and breakout rooms

Bare bones physical teaching environment

- Instructor computer station with projector
- At least one computer per group of students

Bare bones online teaching environment

- A web forum where the librarian and students can post and comment. This could be the discussion board featured in many Learning Management Systems (LMS), in which case the librarian should have instructor privileges in the LMS. There are also free web forum options like Google Groups.

Pre-Instruction Work

1. The librarian selects news articles for groups to read in Activity 1. The articles could be printed out or linked in a LibGuide. I

suggest providing access to the content via the publisher platform where possible rather than through a database, since the publisher platform may provide context clues for evaluation that are absent from a database (e.g., ads, photos, related articles, etc.). To best engage students, these articles should cover current or recent events, and should come from both mainstream and reputable "new media" sources. For each class, the librarian should pair up some articles on the same topic from different publications, as well as articles from the same publication on different topics, in order to highlight differences in the way topics can be framed in the same publication and across publications. A few recent (as of this writing) examples that work well:

a. How was Muhammed Ali's life represented after he died? Compare a news source that talks about him "transcending race" and one that emphasizes his civil rights work.
b. Students look at news articles from the same source. One article reports on an act of violence or civil disobedience perpetrated by a white person and one by a person of color. Are there differences in the way these acts are framed?
c. Students compare an article on Trump's appointment of Steve Bannon as chief strategist to an article about his role as Breitbart Editor-at-Large published prior to his appointment. How does the language used to describe him differ?

2. The librarian creates a LibGuide with resources for finding information about news companies. There are a number of databases that could be used in this activity, depending on institutional subscriptions. Suggested resources:
    a. IBISWorld—a business database with Industry Reports for Newspaper Publishing, Magazine & Periodical Publishing, Television Broadcasting, Internet Publishing and Broadcasting. Industry Reports include major companies in the industry and market information (including age, gender, and household income levels of readers).
    b. Statista—a searchable collection of data and statistics, with data on consumer use of various media and other data relevant to a media industry.

   c. **LexisNexis Academic**—its company profiles section has information about media companies, including news, personnel, and financial information.
   d. **Plunkett Research**—contains industry overviews, market information, and company profiles, including in the areas of Entertaining & Media and Telecommunications.
   e. **MediaMark Research & Intelligence (MRI)**—includes information about media consumers, including media habits broken down by demographic groups.
   f. **SimplyMap**—includes data on media consumers and media habits broken down by demographic group.
   g. **Simmons OneView**—contains information from the National Consumer Study, with information on consumer media habits (e.g., who reads a newspaper or watches a news channel).
   h. **SRDS**—provides access to demographic and market segmentation data of media consumers, newspaper circulation information, and corporate ownership information of different media sources, including newspapers, websites, and TV stations.
3. If the lesson is being taught as a one-shot session, I recommend creating a video or text-and-screenshot tutorial showing how to search one of these databases to find information. Students should be encouraged to view it before the session to prepare them for Activity 2. This would cut down on the amount of time that is spent on demonstrating the resource in class.
4. The librarian should provide a way for students to write down their answers to the hands-on searching activity. This could be a printed worksheet collected at the end of class, a Google Form or Google Sheet, or a discussion forum in the LMS.

Learning Outcomes and Activities

Learning Outcomes

1. Students will explore strategies for critically analyzing news texts to uncover instances of bias or marginalizing language.
2. Students will be able to identify socioeconomic conditions under which a news media source is produced and disseminated.

3. Students will reflect on how socioeconomic conditions of news production and dissemination may lead to bias against or marginalization of certain groups and interests and favoring of others.

Learning Activities

1. Rhetorical analysis of news sources *(LO1, 20–30 minutes, essential)*
    - In small groups, students compare and contrast two news articles. Students read the articles together and identify differences in how two news media sources cover the stories, using the following questions as a guide:
        - ▷ Are your articles from the same publication or different publications?
        - ▷ (If students have links to content instead of printouts) Can you find information in about this publication's mission, purpose, values, etc. on its website?
        - ▷ What topics do your articles discuss?
        - ▷ Right off the bat, what do you notice about how the news media sources cover the stories? Can you identify differences or similarities?
        - ▷ What kinds of descriptive language do the articles use? Do they portray the topic in a positive, negative, or neutral light?
    - Each group shares what they found.
    - The entire class discusses how to analyze news sources for bias. The point of this discussion is not to fault a news source for not being perfectly neutral or objective per se (bias is "a necessary result of human beings putting structure on their world."[12] Rather, analyzing news media can show how certain biases function to marginalize or misrepresent certain individuals or groups of people. Students should use the insights from their close readings to discuss how bias functions through a variety of means, including the language articles use (how people or events are described), how issues are covered, who gets quoted as a source, and which facts are juxtaposed together.[13]
    - Variations for online instruction: If using a web conferencing platform, students discuss in small groups using breakout

rooms and then return to the main room for the full class discussion. If using the bare bones online set up, students discuss in small groups in separate discussion forum threads. A volunteer from each group should then give a summary of what their group found in a main thread viewed by the entire class.

2. Search Demonstration *(LO2, 15–20 minutes, optional)*
   - Students consult the LibGuide with links to resources for researching media companies.
   - Variation: students view a tutorial and explore the LibGuide before the class.
3. Hands-on searching *(LO2, 30–60 minutes, essential)*
   - In their groups, students search for information about the company that produced one of the news sources that they analyzed in Activity 1. Their searching will be structured around answering a set of questions (see Assessment Tool B below).
   - Variations for online instruction: If using a web conferencing platform, students work in small groups in breakout rooms. One student could do the hands-on searching and share their screen while the others provide input, or all the students could search individually and share their screens as needed. If using the asynchronous instruction option, students should work to find answers to the questions to Assessment Tool B individually, post tentative answers in discussion forum threads (one thread per small group), and discuss as a group which answer to submit.
   - Students record their answer to the questions to Assessment Tool B.
4. Discussion and Reflection *(LO3, 20–30 minutes, optional in-class or homework)*
   - Students reflect on the initial rhetorical analysis in light of what they have discovered about their media source. Students should consider how factors including ownership of the company that creates the news, its status as a publicly traded company (or not), reliance on advertising revenue, and the demographics of its readership may shape how issues get

covered and certain groups and interests are marginalized or represented. Students will also discuss the relative ease or difficulty of finding out information about their news media source's ownership and reader demographics, who is able to access this information, and who is not.

- Depending on the amount of time for instruction, this piece could be done in class as a discussion or after class as a written reflection piece (Assessment Tool C). If the latter, the students should consult reflection prompts provided by the librarian. Ideally, there would an opportunity for both in-class group discussion and individual written reflections outside of class.
- Variations for online instruction: If using a synchronous instruction option, a discussion could take place over the web conferencing platform. However, most online classrooms do not allow instructors to use non-verbal communication (eye contact, smiling, etc.) to encourage student participation, making it easy for individual students to "hide." Thus, I recommend that written reflection be used in place of, or in addition to, discussion in an online environment.

Assessment

Assessment Goals and Tools for Each of the Activities:

Activity 1: Were the students able to "decode" a news media text? Could they point to examples of bias in the language or coverage of an issue?

- Informal Assessment Tool A: Informal assessment during the class discussion as part of Activity 1.

Activity 2: Were they able to find information about the news media company ownership and reader demographics?

- Summative Assessment Tool B: Students write answers to the following questions.
    1. What is the media source you are looking at?
    2. Who owns this media source?
    3. What information can you find about how this media source makes its revenue?
    4. What kind of demographic information can you find out about the people who read it? Can you find demographic information about its employees?

5. Who has access to this media source? Who might have access or not have access to financial information about this source?
    - ♦ If it is an online source, is it openly available on the web or is it behind a paywall?
    - ♦ Is the company financial information freely available or did you need to use a subscription database?

Activity 3: Did the student exhibit a more nuanced understanding of how socioeconomic factors, including media company ownership and readership, may shape the way information is produced?

- Summative/Authentic Assessment Tool C: Students' written reflection for Activity 3 (see Assessment Tool B, above).

This lesson employs both formative and summative assessment components. Success should be measured holistically, taking a combined view of the following:

- Were students able to identify examples of bias in a news text?
- Could students provide specific answers to the questions relating to media company research?
- Did students synthesize what they had discovered about biased coverage, media ownership, and reader demographics and offer a nuanced understanding of how the latter realities might impact the way that news is covered and presented?

Notes

1. Association of College & Research Libraries, *Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education*, 2015, http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.
2. Ibid.
3. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share, "Toward Critical Media Literacy: Core Concepts, Debates, Organizations, and Policy," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 26, no. 3 (September 2005): 369–86, doi:10.1080/01596300500200169.
4. Douglas Kellner and Jeff Share, "Critical Media Literacy Is Not an Option," *Learning Inquiry* 1, no. 1 (May 2, 2007): 65, doi:10.1007/s11519-007-0004-2.
5. Kellner and Share, "Toward Critical Media Literacy," 370.
6. Seth Ashley, Adam Maksl, and Stephanie Craft, "Developing a News Media Literacy Scale," *Journalism & Mass Communication Educator* 68, no. 1 (March 1, 2013): 7, doi:10.1177/1077695812469802.
7. Kellner and Share, "Toward Critical Media Literacy," 377.
8. Ibid., 376.
9. Renee Hobbs et al., "Learning to Engage: How Positive Attitudes about the News, Media Literacy, and Video Production Contribute to Adolescent Civic Engagement," *Educational Media International* 50, no. 4 (December 2013): 246, doi:10.1080/09523987.2013.862364.
10. Ibid., 237.

11. Renee Hobbs, "News Literacy: What Works and What Doesn't," 2010, https://works.bepress.com/reneehobbs/12/download/; Sue A. Lafky, "Teaching the Ideologically Unreliable: A Challenge for Mass Communication Educators," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1994): 108–20.
12. John L. Hochheimer and Joanne Dvorak Hochheimer, "All the News That's Fit: Introducing Journalism Education as If Students' Lives Mattered," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1994): 127.
13. Ibid., 128.

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